

Tuberculosis - The facts

What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (also called TB) is a disease caused by a bacteria (germ). Tuberculosis usually affects the lungs, but it can also affect the kidneys, bones, spine, brain and other parts of the body.

How is TB spread?

TB is spread through the air when a person with untreated TB disease of the lungs coughs or sneezes.

People who breathe in TB germs usually need to have very close day-to-day contact with someone who has the disease. It is NOT spread by dishes, cups, eating utensils, linen or clothing.

How does TB affect the body?

TB infection

Infection with tuberculosis means the person has TB germs in their body. Usually the person's immune (defence) system is able to fight these germs, causing them to become inactive. In about 90 per cent of people the germs will always be inactive. People with TB infection are not sick and cannot spread TB to others. This is called latent TB infection.

TB disease

TB disease is an illness caused by active TB germs. The illness may occur shortly after the germs enter the body, or many years later when the body's immune system is weakened due to other factors such as ageing, diabetes, HIV infection, kidney disease or cancer. A person with TB disease has active TB germs PLUS signs of illness

What are the signs of TB?

TB can attack any part of the body but the lungs are the most common site. People with TB disease may have some or all of the following signs:

- always feeling tired
- loss of appetite
- unexplained loss of weight
- a cough that lasts more than three weeks
- fevers
- sweating at night.

Sometimes, a person with TB may cough up blood stained sputum. Some people with active TB disease may have only mild symptoms.

What are the common tests for TB?

- The Tuberculin Skin Test (Mantoux test) shows if a person is likely to have been infected.
- A chest x-ray can show whether TB has affected the lungs.
- A sputum test shows if TB germs are present in coughed up sputum.

Who should be tested for TB?

- People who have any signs of TB disease.
- People who live and work in close contact with someone who is known or suspected to have TB disease of the lungs.
- People who have HIV infection or another condition that put them at higher risk for TB disease.

How is TB treated?

TB infection

The doctor may prescribe a course of tablets or follow up with regular chest x-rays.

TB disease

A combination of special antibiotics is taken for at least 6 months. It is important to remember that TB can be cured if treatment is completed and taken correctly. However TB can return and be more difficult to cure if medicines are not taken regularly for the full course of treatment.

Are TB patients always infectious?

People with TB disease of the lungs or throat can be infectious to others. People with TB in other parts of their body are not infectious. In most cases, after two weeks of taking TB medicine, patients with TB disease will no longer spread germs. If a patient is infectious, a nurse from the Tuberculosis Program will assess which people need testing and arrange for this to be done. 'Contacts' are often family members but may be close friends or work mates. Contact tracing is always done sensitively and confidentially.

Can I be immunised for TB?

BCG vaccination (TB immunisation) is not routinely recommended for the general Australian community where the risk of exposure to TB is low. BCG vaccination is only indicated for specific groups at increased risk of TB.

Further information

For further information, please contact:

TB Control Section
Department of Health
Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit
Phone: 1300 651 160
Email: infectious.diseases@health.vic.gov.au

You can get language assistance through the Translating & Interpreting Service (TIS) for the charge of a local call 13 14 50.

Fact sheets available in:

- Arabic
- Cambodian
- Chinese
- Croatian
- Dari
- Somali
- Vietnamese.

You can find more information at:
www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas